



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF **ENERGY**

**SAVANNAH RIVER OPERATIONS OFFICE
AIKEN, SC 29802**

NEWS MEDIA CONTACT:

Jim Giusti, DOE, (803) 952-7697
james-r.giusti@srs.gov

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Paivi Nettamo, SRNS, (803) 952-6938
paivi.nettamo@srs.gov

Big Top Tent Keeps TRU Waste Trucks, Tanks Dry before Inspection and Shipping

Big Top Aids Solid Waste Management in Shipping Protocol

Aiken, S.C. – Important projects for the Recovery Act – and not a circus act – are being performed under the Big Top at Solid Waste Management facility at the Department of Energy's (DOE) Savannah River Site (SRS).

The jumbo-size vinyl tent with a metal frame measuring 160 feet long, 24 feet wide, and 20 feet high is used in the Site's E Area to shelter trucks awaiting inspection before they carry transuranic (TRU) waste offsite to a geologic repository for final disposition. The Big Top, which is a brand name for the structure, keeps the truck, containers of TRU waste and drivers and inspectors dry during inclement weather. The result is a quicker, more efficient inspection and, in the long-run, a timely delivery to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M.

By virtue of appearance and functionality, the Big Top has become the greatest show around to those involved in the TRU waste shipping program at SRS.

"Now we can ship in inclement weather" remarked Reinhard Friske, the TRU waste shipping manager. "Inspections are performed inside the tent. Before, we were all out in the elements." The Big Top, which was assembled in September and October, can accommodate two trucks at the same time.

Mike Simmons, the DOE federal project director of solid waste for the Recovery Act, said the Big Top was assembled to support the state of South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) in its inspections of the shipments before they leave the Site. "If the smear is wet, it will shield alpha and beta activity," Simmons said. "In addition, the required inspection stickers do not adhere to a wet surface."

"We agreed to help so there would be no delays in shipping," Simmons said. "We found putting in a shelter would be the most cost-effective way to get the job done."

In addition, the shipment is inspected by the driver and the South Carolina State Transport Police, said Doug Wooldridge, the TRU waste shipping coordinator.

With the installation of the Big Top, loaded trucks are parked under the tent the night before their scheduled departure, assuring a dry inspection in the morning. The pre-transport inspection process is in two parts. First, the truck driver and the South Carolina State Transport Police inspect the condition of the truck and its compliance with Department of Transportation (DOT) requirements. Next, SCDHEC examines the shipment for its radiological requirements, as well as those of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

Until the installation of the Big Top, inspections were dependent upon good weather or the availability of the other covered storage areas. "Having this tent does not disrupt the other parts of the TRU waste program," Friske explained. Trucks and their three stainless steel TRUPACT II containers, which collectively hold about 45,000 pounds of radioactive job control waste generated at the Site, used to be sheltered in a large building where containers are X-rayed. In order to accommodate the trucks, the existing containers needed to be relocated to both free physical space and to keep the collective level of plutonium in one location below the prescribed limit. Regardless of the extent of juggling, an entire truck and its shipment could not fit into the building.

The Big Top provides a backdrop of stability to the TRU shipping program. "We don't act alone at Savannah River," Friske said. The WIPP geologic repository handles all TRU disposals across the country, and any glitch in departure times affects the overall receiving schedule at WIPP. "If we miss a shipment, it has a national impact. If we can't ship on a specific day, the state regulators just wasted a day waiting to inspect a shipment that did not leave," he said.

The TRU waste disposition project is currently funded by the Recovery Act and is being performed by Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS), the management and operations contractor at SRS. Through the Recovery Act, more than 50 percent of the Site's environmental footprint will be eliminated to make way for future missions.

Starting next summer, the number of weekly shipments will increase under the planned TRU waste processing schedule. With the upcoming schedule acceleration fast approaching, the Big Top will be an invaluable tool to ensure that TRU waste activities and subsequent shipments remain on time during periods of wet weather.

Additional information on the Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management and the Savannah River Site can be found at <http://www.em.doe.gov> or <http://www.srs.gov>. For more information about the SRS Recovery Act Project, visit www.srs.gov/recovery.

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The Big Top provides a shelter for the TRU shipment during mandated inspections.

Note: Other photos are available upon request.